

Australian gold going after Eagle

By Roger Boye

Australian officials have issued new gold coins in an attempt to capture some of the money being spent on the American Eagle and other bullion items.

The so-called Nugget goes on sale in the U.S. Tuesday. Investors can buy four sizes of coins containing one-tenth to 1 ounce of precious metal, paying for the gold plus a small sales premium.

"We hope to gain 10 percent of the world (gold coin) market in five years," said Donna Tasso, a spokeswoman for the Nugget program. "The coins should be available at major brokerage houses and bullion dealers, the same type of places that offer the Eagle."

Australia introduced proof specimens of the Nugget in 1986. Uncirculated (investment-grade) coins made their debut in Sydney late last month and soon will be available worldwide.

The Nugget launch follows an April 15 release of gold and silver pieces authorized by South Dakota. Those items, dubbed Bisons, have no legal-tender value but are expected to compete with American Eagles.

As of May 13, the U.S. Mint had sold 4.3 million uncirculated gold Eagles, which contain 2.4 million ounces of gold, and 9.6 million uncirculated silver Eagles, according to a mint spokesman. When the program started last fall, officials had projected first-year sales of just 2.2 million troy ounces of gold and 4 million silver coins.

"The last six months have shown us that the American Eagle can compete and win in the world marketplace," said mint director Donna Pope. During the last seven months, Eagles have been the world's most popular gold bullion coin, surpassing the Canadian Maple Leaf, top seller in 1985.

● At least 20 coin dealers will do business next Sunday at the annual show of the Schaumburg Numismatic Society. Hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Holiday Inn, 860 W. Irving Park Rd., Itasca. Admission is free. Old coins, paper money and baseball cards also will be offered for sale.